

WRITING PRESIDENT'S PAGES

National Conference of Bar Presidents Communications Committee

Words are the attorney's stock in trade. Why then do so many bar leaders dread writing the president's column? Here is a guaranteed formula for writing spellbinding president's pages and enjoying it. Well, that may be bit of an exaggeration, but that leads to the first point.

President's pages don't have to be boring. You have freedom. You don't have to cover a specific substantive topic, like tax law changes. Pick a subject that interests you and that you think will interest your association members. Start with a title or anecdote or both to grab your readers' attention. Given the subjectivity of humor, be wary of jokes. But a short story can often convey a point, even if all readers don't find it humorous.

One column titled "Leather Pants & Bar Programs" started with an anecdote about how the president's wife had expressed an interest in upgrading from fabric to leather seats in her new car because she preferred the feel of leather. When the president learned the cost of the "leather package," he suggested that she buy leather pants instead; and noted that way she could enjoy the feel of leather even when not in the car.

This true story introduced the president's point that the association would be looking carefully at new expenditures, and at cutting programs that did not justify their cost. And it probably enticed more readers than a "budget tightening" headline would have.

Movies and songs can provide titles for articles, and lead to a theme. Likely more than one column has used the classic film "It's a Wonderful Life" to introduce how fortunate lawyers are to be granted the privilege to practice law, and to be able to help their clients. Or how much different our society would be without the improvements and protections secured by lawyers.

Sources of ideas for articles include your association's upcoming events, NCBP's coverage of hot topics, and other president's pages. It is hard to imagine a lawyer who would not be flattered to have another president borrow his or her idea (with appropriate credit, of course).

As the most visible representative of the association, make your columns upbeat. There may be times when you have to address serious topics. Those present opportunities to emphasize how lawyers can improve or are improving the situation.

Consider lead time when addressing upcoming events. Most publications come out monthly or quarterly, and may have deadlines several weeks ahead. That leads to another frequently made, and ignored, recommendation. Plan or write your columns ahead of when they are due. As your term approaches, you may want to consider a list of topics for the year. Having one or two columns "in the can" for a month when you just cannot find the time to write one can be a blessing.

Writing style and format are important. You are not writing a brief. Again, it does not have to be dull. Write in short sentences and short paragraphs. Look at your local newspaper or *People Magazine*. Short paragraphs are less formidable to the reader. Some editors take their editing function more seriously than others. Have someone read your draft article. This requires writing it before it is due. It also provides time to edit it yourself. Run a picture that goes with the article: a picture beyond the presidential head shot. A picture of something in addition to the president's likeness may pique the readers' interest.

Proper planning, interesting issues and a touch of creativity are the keys to great president's pages. Don't be afraid to step beyond the comfort zone. Following these simple suggestions can help you write columns that may be useful long after your presidential year has ended.